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CENTER FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Dr. Joshua Lederberg
Co-Chair Carnegie Commission on ST&G
10 Waverly Place
New York, NY 10003

Dear Josh: -

Thank you for your letter of June 17 regarding the proposed informal workshop in New York on July 11 on the general topic of the appropriate role of expertise in a democracy. I have indicated to Maxine Rockoff by phone that I will try very hard to attend if I can fly from Burlington, VT, rather than having to drive 7 hours to and from Cambridge in order to take the shuttle to New York. It appears I could do this on a reasonable schedule, especially if the workshop doesn't begin before 10am.

I think the workshop is a good idea. I agree with your proposed agenda, except that I feel the notion of rationality as a political ideology favoring 'technocracy' would not lead to fruitful discussion. There is a very pragmatic reason for rationality in decision-making, namely that individuals and groups in society ordinarily hold mutually conflicting values -- not only conflicting among different individuals and groups, but, more importantly, conflicting among simultaneously held values in one individual. Rational discussion is, so far as I know, the only process we have for achieving some measure of consistency among values, other than the exercise of coercion by one group on another -- i.e. the implicit threat of superior force.

I also particularly like the extension of Chuck Powers's concept of "informed consent" as a way of defining the problem of expert decision-making in a democratic polity. Not only the introduction of new technology but the introduction of new rules for the regulation of technology are forms of social experimentation which require some form of "informed consent" on the part of the affected (or potentially affected) publics. What is a reasonable and feasible definition of this informed consent in a variety of social situations? We have become accustomed to expecting informed consent in some degree in the introduction of technology, but shouldn't informed consent also be required in connection with the deliberate withholding of technology. This is an idea to which we have not yet become accustomed, but has recently arisen in connections with AIDS drugs.

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Studies by Yankelovitch and his colleagues in the Public Agenda Foundation have shown that the main differences between experts and the public is that experts are less likely to harbor internally inconsistent opinions. Public opinion experiments with representative lay groups have shown that interaction with experts usually leads to modification of opinions by lay groups in the direction of greater internal consistency, and also generally to greater, though not complete, convergence between expert and lay views.

I don't know who you else are thinking of inviting to this workshop beyond selected members of the Commission and the Advisory Council. I have several suggestions in this regard beyond Yaron Ezrahi (on whose thesis committee I served 20 years ago), who I think is an excellent choice. One would be Dan Yankelovitch himself (preferably) or, failing that, somebody he might suggest who is familiar with the Public Agenda Foundation studies in this area. Another would be Michael Maccoby, a social psychologist and psychoanalyst, who is Director of the Project on Technology, Work & Character in Washington. Michael has had a long association with the Science, Technology and Public Policy Program at the Kennedy School, and has much experience in studying leaders and elites in different countries. He also has much experience in convening groups of laymen and experts for dialogue on major problems where there is great conflict. Still another person would be Gerald Holton, a physicist and historian of science, who was responsible for the original idea that led to the extensive studies of the interaction between lay groups and scientific experts by the Public Agenda Foundation, mentioned above. Another suggestion would be Larry Susskind of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT, who has very extensive practical experience in mediating environmental and energy policy disputes, including superfund issues.

I am also enclosing some notes I made in connection with a series of seminars we have been planning on the future of the "democratic vision" in a technological society.

I look forward to the discussion on July 11.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Harvey Brooks", written in a cursive style.

Harvey Brooks